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ABSTRACT

This study presents data and findings on student retention at South Texas Community College (STCC) and recommends steps to improve retention rates. STCC groups attrition into three categories: (1) positive attrition, due to graduation, completion or transfer; (2) neutral attrition, due to non-institutional conflicts; and (3) negative attrition, due to academic underachievement. Based on the 1994 first-time student cohort, STCC's persisting or graduating rate was 40 percent. The Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness found 50 variables that were significantly related to retention, but few relationships are strong enough alone to predict student persistence. At STCC, college grade point average is the single best predictor of retention (r=.477). Employment alone was found to be only weakly related to student attendance behavior. Some important findings include: (1) both receiving financial aid and attending developmental studies are positively related to persistence; (2) personalized contact is important in student persistence; (3) part-time students (53% of the total) are at high risk for attrition; (4) placing students on academic probation has a negative impact on retention; and (5) nearly all graduates included in this study did not have any breaks in semester enrollment prior to graduation. Recommendations are provided for each of these five findings. (RDG)

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Retention At South Texas Community College: A Delicate Balance

Special Report Number One
From the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness
July 1998

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Overview - Retention at South Texas Community College: A Delicate Balance

➢ The Balance

The effects of academic probation and receiving financial aid are two among 50 areas of statistically significant findings in an exploratory study of the factors that influence retention at STCC. By themselves the relationships discovered are not strong enough to be used in predicting student persistence. The patterns of findings, however, point to meaningful trends that can guide efforts to improve retention.

"The student's enrollment decision is determined by a "weighing" of factors. STCC's job is to tip the balance in favor of re-enrollment."

- Attrition may be divided into three categories: positive, neutral and negative attrition.
- Efforts to increase retention can most profitably be aimed at decreasing neutral and negative attrition.

The pattern of results in the retention study indicate that STCC should be able to reduce both neutral attrition (e.g. attrition due to employment and other scheduling conflicts) and negative attrition (due to students being insufficiently prepared or inadequately motivated to finish their studies).

- In both instances the student's enrollment decision is determined by a "weighing" of factors. STCC's job is to tip the balance in favor of re-enrollment.

The superior persistence shown by students who fall into one or more of the "Special Populations" categories provides a clear illustration of this balancing effect.

"Both receiving financial aid and attending developmental studies classes are positively related to persistence."

- Analysis reveals that this increased persistence is due to the cumulative and intertwined effects of the students' receiving financial aid, attending developmental courses, or both. Neither factor alone is adequate to explain the "Special Populations" group's persistence.

To increase retention in this complex environment, STCC must attend to every aspect of a student's college experience.

➢ Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1: Both receiving financial aid and attending developmental studies classes are positively related to persistence.

Recommendation: Since students are more apt to voluntarily seek financial aid than developmental studies, additional emphasis on developmental studies will benefit the institution. An upbeat, widespread campaign

encouraging students to voluntarily take developmental courses to "Get the Tools for Success" could have a measurable impact.

"Personalized contact is important to our students' persistence."

Finding 2: Results for Developmental Studies and the finding that mere contact with Student Support Service personnel increases student persistence indicate that personalized contact is important to our students' persistence.

Recommendation: STCC should take every opportunity to personalize all student encounters.

Recommendation: The personal nature of STCC could be emphasized if its web home page displayed pictures of students, and linked to a "problems" page for frequently encountered difficulties, a suggestion box, and a "Help" page with the names of people to contact for help with specific kinds of questions. With these kinds of changes, a visit to the STCC web site can be turned into a personal encounter.

Recommendation: Any information designed to attract new or returning students should be personalized to include the student's name and faculty or staff contact names. The confidence given by knowing specifically who to call is important in helping people who dislike working with an "impersonal" Institution.

"Any information designed to attract new or returning students should be personalized to include the student's name and faculty or staff contact names."

Recommendation: The role of faculty in personalizing the college cannot be overstated. Faculty, both regular and adjunct, should be complimented on their efforts to build rapport with their students, regardless of class size, and encouraged to seize every opportunity to increase student contact.

Recommendation: A task force of faculty, staff and students should be formed to identify barriers to student success and help build a campus culture that encourages continuous enrollment.

Finding 3: Part-time students are a large group (53% of the students in this study) at high risk for attrition.

Recommendation: To start, STCC should study its evening and weekend offerings to ensure that for as many programs as possible all the necessary classes are offered evenings and weekends. At the same time, the school can also investigate increasing the opportunities for distance learning and other innovative approaches.

"Part-time students are a large group at high risk for attrition."

Recommendation: A task force of faculty, staff and part-time students should be formed to find ways of overcoming any barriers that may prevent part-time students from persisting at higher rates.

"Placing a student on academic probation, whether initial or continued, has on overly negative impact on retention."

Finding 4: Placing a student on academic probation, whether initial or continued, has on overly negative impact on retention.

Recommendation: To reduce any negative effects of labeling, academic probation should be renamed to something less punitive. Even initial academic probation status should trigger additional academic advising with the possibility of vocational testing and other support to assist the student in an atmosphere of encouragement.

"The imposition of Academic Suspension or any other sanction that makes it more likely that a student will stop-out should be reconsidered."

Finding 5: Of the 136 graduates included in this study only 2 had any breaks in Fall or Spring Semester enrollment prior to initial graduation.

Recommendation: The imposition of Academic Suspension or any other sanction that makes it more likely that a student will stop-out should be reconsidered. The use of such sanctions should be minimized. The risks inherent in a student's stopping out should be discussed with instructors, counselors, and other staff as well as the students themselves to reduce the prevalent notion that a stop-out is not harmful.

➢ **Suggestions for Future Research**

1. Higher Order Models. The search for higher order models to accurately identify students at high risk for dropping or stopping out should be continued. Such higher order modeling, using a variety of techniques, was not successful in this study, but as STCC ages and school functions become more regular, the pattern of data seen here will change. As fewer factors become more important, statistical techniques such as SPSS's Answer Tree and step-wise multiple regression should be able to assist in identifying more coherent risk factors.

2. Focus Groups of Employed and Part-time Students. The data show that part-time students, and employed students are somewhat less likely to persist than others. Currently enrolled students representing these groups should be randomly selected and asked to participate in focus groups. These groups could identify institutional barriers or other factors that may influence the student's decisions about continued enrollment. These students could also form the basis of a longitudinal study of retention within these groups.

Focus groups of part-time and employed students "could identify institutional barriers or other factors that may influence the student's decisions about continued enrollment."

3. Division Level Research. A task force, led by the division director, should be formed within each division to study the factors unique to each division that influence retention and attrition within the division. The results of the current study are compatible with the possibility that focusing on smaller more homogenous groups would yield better results.

"Faculty should be given information about the dangers of stopping out, and part-time status to help them encourage students to continue."

➢ **Suggestions for Instructional Divisions**

1. Scheduling to Improve Accessibility. Each division should scrutinize its schedule to look for ways to improve accessibility for part-time and evening students.

2. Faculty Awareness. Division directors and senior administrators should make faculty aware of the crucial role they play in retention. Faculty should be given information about the dangers of stopping out, and part-time status to help them encourage students to continue.

3. Internal Retention Studies. Internal retention studies should be undertaken to identify dropout points within courses and divisions.

➢ **Suggestions for Student Support Services and Ancillary Services**

1. Internal Task Forces. Personnel in each of these areas need to know that each contact with a student, to a greater or lesser extent, affects that student's decision about enrollment. Each of theses areas should form internal task forces to examine ways to increase feeling of personal attention given to the student.

"Giving out business cards would give the student the feeling that the staff member was taking personal responsibility for the interaction."

2. Business Cards to Improve Personal Responsibility. The giving out of business cards, even for personnel having routine contact with the students, would be one way of giving the student the feeling that the staff member was taking personal responsibility for the interaction. The cost of the business cards would be small compared to the cost of losing a student.

"Each contact with a student affects that student's decision about enrollment."

Retention at South Texas Community College: A Delicate Balance

The Retention Problem at Community Colleges

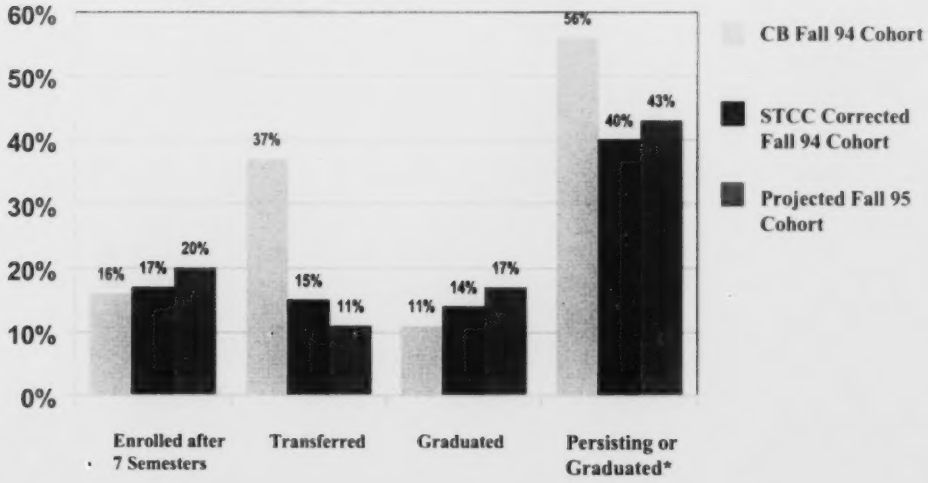
Open admissions, which permits ease of entry, exit and re-entry, has been one of the hallmarks of the community college movement. It has been responsible for allowing many students to achieve educational goals they otherwise would have been denied. It has also led some researchers (Cohen and Brawer 1982) to suggest that traditional measures of retention have little meaning, as "students use community colleges for their purposes and frequently achieve those purposes short of program completion."

Such a perspective clashes with the institutional reality of performance measures and retention rates being calculated by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Reviewing the retention rates for the Fall 1994 First Time In College Cohort, from the Coordinating Board's 1998 Annual Data Profile, South Texas Community College's Persisting or Graduating rate of 56% was one of the higher in the state.

"More important than the Persisting or Graduating rate, however, is an understanding of the factors that influence attrition and persistence at STCC."

An examination of records at University of Texas Pan American (UTPA) and transcript fields from our own SIS system, revealed that 518 of the 929 students reported as being First Time In College Students in Fall 1994 were actually transfer students. This resulted in an apparent transfer rate of 37%, over twice the actual rate. When accurate figures are used, STCC's Persisting or Graduating rate stands at 40% (See Table 1).

Table 1
Comparison of Coordinating Board Fall 94, STCC Corrected Fall 94, and Projected Fall 95, Transfer, Persisting, and Graduated Rates after 7 Semesters



*Unduplicated count of all students in cohort who have graduated, transferred, or are still enrolled.

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This difference in rates is important to understand. It means that, since STCC has more accurately reported each succeeding year's the First Time In College Cohort, the college's Persisting or Graduating rate as shown in the Annual Data Profile may appear to decrease, even though the actual rate is likely to increase.

"The variability of the findings in the literature . . . dictate that each institution must study its own retention patterns without relying on common assumptions."

For example, preliminary figures for the Fall 1995 First Time In College Cohorts indicate that both the proportion of students still enrolled and those graduated will increase over the rates for the Fall 1994 cohort. This is the pattern one would expect from a new institution still developing its procedures, programs and methods.

Factors that Influence Attrition

More important than the Persisting or Graduating rate, however, is an understanding of the factors that influence attrition and persistence at STCC. In today's institutional environment it has become "increasingly important to characterize . . . the potential dropout; to determine the reasons why he or she might withdraw, and to see if procedures or programs could be established to help reduce those numbers that are going back out the open door," (Rounds, 1984, p.1).

"At STCC, female students do persist at a higher rate, but . . . this apparent relationship between gender and persistence is entirely due to two other factors."

The variability of the findings in the literature (where factors that are highly important for retention at one institution may be unimportant or even negatively correlated with retention at another) dictate that each institution must study its own retention patterns without relying on common assumptions. The relationship of gender to persistence provides a case in point.

In most studies, females have slightly higher attrition rates than males. In the state of Texas, females persist at higher rates (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Statewide Fact Book, 1997). At STCC, female students do persist at a higher rate, but - as will be discussed below - this apparent relationship between gender and persistence is entirely due to two other factors.

"At STCC, college GPA is the best single predictor of retention."

A student's college grade point average (GPA) is another factor commonly, although not universally, found to relate highly to persistence. At STCC, college GPA is the best single predictor of retention. Cumulative GPA correlated with persistence score at $r = .477$ (significant at .001).

In many ways the relationship of GPA to retention is a healthy indicator. STCC is keeping its strongest most motivated students. If this were not true, the situation would be grave. Moreover, this finding, in conjunction with findings on the effect of academic probation and financial aid holds, has important implications for retention procedures.

The effects of academic probation and receiving financial aid are two among 50 areas of statistically significant findings discovered in an

exploratory study of factors influencing retention at STCC. By themselves the relationships discovered, although statistically significant, are not strong enough to be used in predicting student persistence. The patterns of findings among the variables, however, do reveal useful trends that can guide efforts to improve retention.

"A student's decision whether to return to school is highly individual and effected not by a few large factors, but by an accumulation of smaller ones."

The shear number of small significant relationships also tells something very meaningful about student retention at STCC. A student's decision whether to return to school is highly individual and effected not by a few large factors, but by an accumulation of smaller ones. In this regard the model developed by M.S. Sheldon is highly relevant.

Categories of Attrition

Attempting to clarify the phenomenon of community college attrition, Sheldon (1982), used a longitudinal study of 6,500 entering community college students, to identify three categories of attrition:

Category one: "positive attrition," composed of students who dropped out after meeting their objectives or who transferred to another institution.

Category two: "neutral attrition," which Sheldon believed implied neither success nor failure, is composed of students who leave because of non-institutional conflicts, such as family commitments, or job requirements.

Category three: "negative attrition," composed of students who dropped out because they were unprepared for class work or who were not adequately motivated to complete their studies.

Although Sheldon believed that only negative attrition was under the control of the college, results from STCC's retention study suggest that institutional policies may also affect some elements of "neutral attrition."

One area where this may be the case is that of employment. Sheldon defined dropouts caused by conflicts with employment as "neutral attrition," and this was the number one reason former students gave (in two surveys of STCC dropouts/stop-outs) for not returning. Employment issues accounted for 31.8% of the explanations given in response to a telephone survey conducted in Fall Semester 1997 and 28.5% in a mail survey of all non-returning students prior to Fall Semester 1996.

"What is necessary to improve retention at STCC is a continued commitment to all aspects of the student's college experience."

Employment

Clearly, conflict with employment can be a powerful factor. Yet when this study examined the effect of employment on three measures of student attendance behavior (examining a full range of possible behavior

patterns from dropping out after a single semester to attending all possible semesters), the effect was found to be statistically significant but weak - providing only a .09% increase in the accuracy of prediction.

When viewed within the context of the high number of significant but weak factors discovered in this study, the small relationship between employment and retention suggests that employment conflicts are only one among a myriad of individualized factors that a student weighs consciously or unconsciously when deciding whether to return to school. The employment conflict may be offered as "the reason" for not returning because it is the most easily explained and the most easily accepted of reasons.

"Great potential exists for increasing college-wide retention by helping part-time students persist."

Does that mean there is nothing we can do about it? No, but it does say that what is necessary to improve retention at STCC is a continued commitment to all aspects of the student's college experience. This is certainly the key to improving the retention of part-time students.

Part-time Students

On all comparisons used in this study, part-time students were shown to be more likely to drop out after a single semester, after two or more consecutive semesters, or to stop out. Part-time students were also less likely than full-time students to attend all possible semesters. With part-time students making up over 53% of the 3104 students included in this study, great potential exists for increasing college-wide retention by helping these students persist.

Certainly, STCC can study its evening and weekend offerings to ensure that for as many programs as possible all the necessary classes are offered at times conducive to part-time attendance. The College can also investigate increasing the opportunities for distance learning and other innovative approaches. This may help while a task force of faculty, staff and part-time students is formed to investigate other services needed to find ways to overcome any barriers that may prevent part-time students from persisting at higher rates. The key is discovering how to better serve this group.

"Two startling examples of the cumulative nature of the factors that influence retention are provided by an examination of the seemingly superior persistence rates for 'Special Populations' and female students."

The Cumulative Nature of Financial Aid and Developmental Studies

To improve retention, STCC must commit itself to functioning like a five-star restaurant. It is not enough for the food and the service to be good, we have to attend to the linen, the flatware, the crystal, and the ambiance as well. It all counts, and it counts differently with different students.

Two startling examples of the cumulative nature of the factors that influence retention are provided by an examination of the seemingly superior persistence rates for "Special Populations" and female students. On all three of the attendance comparisons used in this study, students

who fit into one or more of the Carl Perkins special populations categories (Academically Disadvantaged, Economically Disadvantaged, Disabled, Limited English Proficiency, Displaced Homemaker, or Single Parent) were found to persist at a slightly higher rate than non-special populations students.

"The effects of . . . having received financial aid and of having participated in developmental courses are cumulative and intertwined."

Further investigation shows that this effect is determined by two of the more powerful factors that have a positive impact on retention - financial aid and developmental studies. Neither factor, by itself, explained the whole effect however. When all students receiving financial aid were removed from the study, special populations students still persisted at a higher rate for two of the three comparisons. Similarly, when all students with a history of having taken developmental courses were removed, the special populations students still scored better, but on a different set of two comparisons.

When students who either had received financial aid or had taken developmental courses were removed, no effect was found on two of the three comparisons. On the third comparison, the non-special populations students now persisted at a higher rate than special populations students.

"Developmental studies, in particular, shows good promise as an area for additional emphasis."

The same type of relationship was found in examining the female student's superior retention rate. Neither having taken developmental courses nor having received financial aid, by itself, accounted for all the improvement in persistence. With both factors removed, however, no differences in retention were found to exist between male and female students.

Thus, the effects of these individual factors, a history of having received financial aid and of having participated in developmental courses are cumulative and intertwined. De-emphasizing one or the other may not have a drastic effect on retention, but it would have some effect. To improve retention, extra emphasis should be placed on each program.

Already a pervasive positive factor in retention, developmental studies, in particular, shows good promise as an area for additional emphasis. Anecdotal information suggests that taking developmental courses is still looked at as "a waste of time" by some students. An upbeat, widespread campaign encouraging students to voluntarily take developmental courses to "get the tools for success" could have a measurable impact on retention.

The Pervasive Positive Effect of Developmental Studies

"It is likely that part of the effect is due to a factor (such as the closer relationships that can form in smaller classes) that is common to all the developmental courses."

The effects on student persistence of having taken one or more developmental courses are difficult to study. To avoid inappropriate "circular" measurements, it is necessary to rely on very weak, dichotomous comparisons. But even using these measurements, for 11 of 12 possible tests, a positive relationship was found between taking developmental courses and persisting. A significant positive correlation

$r = .22$ ($p < .001$) was also found between having taken one or more developmental courses and the persistence score.

"Both instructional and relationship factors play a part in making students with a history of taking developmental courses more likely to persist."

The very pervasiveness of the effect of having taken one or more developmental history courses suggests that another factor is at work besides the obvious academic benefits to the students. Since the effect on persistence is very similar whether the student has taken developmental reading, writing, or math, it is likely that part of the effect is due to a factor (such as the closer relationships that can form in smaller classes) that is common to all the developmental courses.

This is not to say that the quality of the instruction or the content of the courses are irrelevant. This data does not lend itself to that interpretation, rather the cumulative and intertwined relationships among the other variables in this study would lead one to suspect that both instructional and relationship factors play a part in making students with a history of taking developmental courses more likely to persist.

Personal Contact Is Critical

The positive effects on student persistence found by measuring student contacts with faculty and staff are often cited as support for Tinto's (1987) Social Integration Model. Although Alan Seidman's review of the effect on retention of applying Tinto's model to community colleges brings him to ask whether the Tinto model is wrong, a positive effect on retention of contact with student support personnel is evident at STCC.

"Findings from the study of both developmental history and support service contact should encourage STCC to look for ways to personalize all student encounters."

Since students who stay in college longer have more opportunities for contact with student support personnel, this analysis is based on the results of a simple dichotomous grouping of students for whom contacts had been recorded and those for whom it had not. Correlating this with the retention score yielded a modest but significant correlation coefficient of .237. A history of contact with student support personnel also related significantly, but weakly, with improved student persistence on all three behavioral measures.

The suggestions for possible actions based on these findings concerning the effect of contact are limitless. But the findings from the study of both developmental history and support service contact should encourage STCC to look for ways to personalize all student encounters. Personalized contact is important to our students, and we can use that knowledge to increase the proportion of stop-outs and dropouts who return to school.

The Dropout and Stop-out Rates

Since yesterday's dropout is only an enrollment away from becoming a returning stop-out, precise figures for stop-out behavior are difficult to determine. Still, extrapolating from the Fall 1995 First Time In College Cohort, one may estimate that in excess of 20% of the First Time in

College students will stop out once or more. Another 22% will drop out after the first semester and not return within three years (See Table 2).

"Knowing that personal interactions are important indicators of persistence, we look for every means possible to personalize our contacts with potential returning students."

Table 2
Attendance Ratios by Semester
Based on Fall 1995 Cohort

	% Continuously Enrolled	% Returning Stop-outs	Combined, % of Total
Six Semesters	14%	11%	25%
Five Semesters	18%	10%	28%
Four Semesters	30%	9%	39%
Three Semesters	40%	4%	44%
Two Semesters	77%	0%	77%

Stop-outs 22%
Dropouts After 1 Semester 23%

Obviously the return of these students would markedly impact retention rates, but how can this be facilitated? Knowing that personal interactions are important indicators of persistence, we look for every means possible to personalize our contacts with potential returning students.

Personalizing Student Contacts

One area where this could easily be implemented is on the STCC web site. Once one is on the home page, where does one go for answers to common problems with registration, academic performance, or financial aid? There are pages with information about most services available, but you have to search for them. If we made the STCC home page more personal, with pictures of students, and links to a "problems" page for frequently encountered difficulties, a suggestion box, and the names of people to contact for help with specific kinds of questions, we would turn a web site visit into a personal encounter.

"Turn a web site visit into a personal encounter."

Following the same logic, any information designed to attract new or returning students should include contact names -- even if the named individual isn't the one who ultimately deals with the student. Many people are more apt to initiate contact if they feel confident that they are contacting the right person or place. Once contact is made, a friendly welcome, the giving of first names and assurance of real assistance can provide the personal contact that may help a student (new or returning) decide to enroll.

"A personalized approach to students could affect both negative attrition and neutral attrition."

Using Sheldon's terminology, such a personalized approach to students could affect both negative attrition and neutral attrition. The feeling of being welcomed and connected may determine whether a current or returning student decides to enroll again.

The Effects of Academic Probation and Suspension

"STCC could improve its retention of students who have had more difficulty with academic achievement."

There is another change STCC can make in this same area that the data indicates will have a marked effect on student retention. An earlier discussion showed that a strong relationship existed between a student's college GPA and their persistence. STCC is doing a good job of retaining its best students, however this relatively high correlation indicates that STCC could improve its retention of students who have had more difficulty with academic achievement.

One simple way to improve this area would be in re-examining the use of academic probation and suspension. There are, admittedly, philosophical issues that go beyond the range of this study involved in the retention of students with academic difficulties, but some improvements can be made without involving issues of academic integrity.

"The labeling of a student as being on academic probation seems in itself to increase attrition."

Setting aside for the moment the issue of academic suspension, which forces a student to at least stop out, the labeling of a student as being on academic probation seems in itself to increase attrition. For students who have no history of being placed on financial aid hold, those who have been placed on initial probation are significantly ($p = .001$) more likely to drop out after a single semester, drop out after two or more consecutive semesters or stop out. They are less likely to attend all possible semesters. They are also significantly less likely to be classified as Persisting or Graduating in the Coordinating Board's measure. They are, however, as likely as other students to transfer to another institution.

This negative effect on attrition is unique to students placed on academic probation. Being placed on financial aid hold does not have the same effect. When students who have been placed on academic probation are removed from the data, being placed on financial aid hold is found to have no effect on retention.

"Many students who have been placed on and even continued on probation, stay in college and achieve their goals. This tells us that with additional assistance, many others may do as well."

Thus the current use of academic probation and suspension directly impacts, what Sheldon termed "negative attrition," and it is in this area that he felt community colleges could have the greatest impact on retention. He was not willing to accept that the bulk of these students could not achieve some measure of success, and having seen the positive impact developmental studies can have on retention, there is no reason that STCC should accept that either.

The association between being placed on academic probation and student persistence, although important, is still weak. Many students who have been placed on and even continued on probation, stay in college and achieve their goals. This tells us that with additional assistance, many others may succeed as well.

To improve this situation, we should begin by renaming academic probation to something less punitive. Academic warning status, advising required status, or some equally innocuous term could be used.

Probation has a punitive sound, which by itself might discourage a small segment of those placed on it.

"Academic suspension should be re-thought."

In addition to a name change, some additional academic advising should be required. Vocational testing and guidance could be used to help the student more accurately access their preparedness and their goals. This should be undertaken in an atmosphere of encouragement, and to better foster this atmosphere, academic suspension should be re-thought.

The Impact of Stopping-out

On the surface, the imposition of a one semester break to allow students to reassess their goals and motivation does not seem unduly harsh. The term suspension may, however, have a punitive tone, and that may be influencing some students to drop out to avoid being suspended.

Furthermore, forcing a student to stop out may have a greater impact than intended. Only 2 of the 136 graduates in this study group had any breaks in regular term (Fall and Spring) enrollment prior to graduation. While this number may increase as time goes on, it seems obvious that it is in both the student's and the institution's interest to avoid anything that might cause the student to stop out.

To improve this, any procedure which interferes with a student's enrollment should be examined and minimized as much as possible. Counselors, teachers and others who influence student decisions should be made aware of stopping-out's potential impact so they may avoid any suggestion that stopping out may be good for some students. Here again, this will help reduce both negative and neutral attrition. It will not solve the retention problem at STCC.

"It is in both the student's and the institution's interest to avoid anything that might cause the student to stop out."

Moving Forward: Percentages and Balance

The data indicates that there is no single approach which will "solve" the retention problem at STCC. Retention here is a matter of percentages and balance. Any positive change will affect the balance for a certain proportion of students, influencing them to persist. As more changes are made, we can look toward improving retention.

Suggestions for future research

1. The data shows that employed students and those on academic probation are somewhat less likely to persist than others. Currently enrolled students representing these groups should be randomly selected and asked to participate in focus groups. These groups could identify institutional barriers or other factors that may influence students' decisions about continued enrollment. These students could also form the basis of a longitudinal study of retention within these groups.

"No single approach will 'solve' the retention problem at STCC. Retention here is a matter of percentages and balance."

2. The search for higher order models to accurately identify students at high risk for dropping or stopping out should be continued. Such higher order modeling, using a variety of techniques, was not successful in this study, but as STCC ages and school functions become more regular, the pattern of data seen here will change. As fewer factors become more important, statistical techniques such as SPSS's Answer Tree and step-wise multiple regression should be able to assist in identifying more coherent risk factors.

"A task force, led by the division director, should be formed within each division to study the factors unique to each division that influence retention and attrition within the division."

3. Research should be conducted at the division level. A task force, led by the division director, should be formed within each division to study the factors unique to each division that influence retention and attrition within the division. The results of the current study are compatible with the possibility that focusing on smaller more homogenous groups would yield better results.

Suggestions for Instructional Divisions

"Each division should scrutinize its schedule to look for ways to improve accessibility for part-time and evening students."

1. Each division should scrutinize its schedule to look for ways to improve accessibility for part-time and evening students. All opportunities for distance learning and other innovative approaches should be investigated, and a task force of faculty, staff and part-time students should be formed to identify and eliminate any barriers that may prevent part-time students from persisting at higher rates.

2. Division directors and senior administrators should make faculty aware of the crucial role they play in retention. Faculty should be given information about the dangers of stopping out, and part-time status to help them encourage students to continue.

3. Internal retention studies should be undertaken to identify dropout points within courses and divisions.

Suggestions for Student Support Services and Ancillary Services

"The cost of the business cards would be small compared to the cost of losing a student."

1. Personnel in each of these areas need to know that each contact with a student, to a greater or lesser extent, affects that student's decision about enrollment. Each of theses areas should form internal task forces to examine ways to increase feeling of personal attention given to the student.

2. The giving out of business cards, even for personnel having routine contact with the students, would be one way of giving the student the feeling that the staff member was taking personal responsibility for the interaction. The cost of the business cards would be small compared to the cost of losing a student.

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South Texas Community College
Retention Comparisons

Fall to Spring	All Students			Entering Freshmen Only			State Average
Measures	95/96	96/97	97/98	95/96	96/97	97/98	95/96*
Fall to Spring Total	63.1%	66.7%	68.1%	69.1%	73.1%	71.6%	66.5%
Full-Time	76.1%	78.8%	81.3%	77.9%	82.3%	84.0%	76.8%
Part-Time	56.4%	59.3%	59.1%	59.4%	63.6%	57.4%	55.5%
Academic	*NC*	64.1%	66.9%	*NC*	73.5%	69.0%	68.3%
Technical	70.3%	71.4%	72.2%	73.1%	75.1%	76.4%	63.5%
Undeclared	54.4%	58.0%	55.7%	58.6%	*NC*	62.4%	*N/A*
Acad. Associate	*NC*	64.1%	66.9%	*NC*	73.5%	69.0%	*N/A*
Tech. Associate	71.4%	69.6%	72.8%	77.2%	74.1%	78.3%	*N/A*
All Associates	72.0%	66.3%	68.8%	76.7%	73.7%	72.1%	*N/A*
Certificate	68.3%	75.1%	71.4%	66.3%	76.4%	74.5%	*N/A*
Undeclared	54.4%	58.0%	55.7%	58.6%	*NC*	62.4%	*N/A*
Finanical Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	81.4%	85.0%	85.5%	*N/A*
No Fin. Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	53.8%	56.1%	50.8%	*N/A*

Fall to Fall	All Students			Entering Freshmen Only			State Average
Measures	95/96	96/97	97/98	95/96	96/97	97/98	94/95#
Fall to Fall Total	39.9%	43.9%	*N/A*	44.5%	45.8%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Full-Time	46.8%	51.7%	*N/A*	51.0%	54.7%	*N/A*	51.5%
Part-Time	36.3%	39.2%	*N/A*	37.3%	36.6%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Academic	*NC*	44.4%	*N/A*	*NC*	49.6%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Technical	41.8%	45.1%	*N/A*	45.5%	43.1%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Undeclared	37.0%	37.0%	*N/A*	40.2%	*NC*	*N/A*	*N/A*
Academic Assoc.	*NC*	44.4%	*N/A*	*NC*	49.6%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Technical Assoc.	44.8%	47.2%	*N/A*	46.9%	46.2%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Associate	45.6%	45.5%	*N/A*	47.6%	48.5%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Certificate	37.0%	40.9%	*N/A*	43.3%	38.9%	*N/A*	*N/A*
Undeclared	37.0%	37.0%	*N/A*	40.2%	*NC*	*N/A*	*N/A*
Finanical Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	48.7%	51.9%	*N/A*	*N/A*
No Fin. Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	39.2%	37.1%	*N/A*	*N/A*

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South Texas Community College
Retention Comparisons

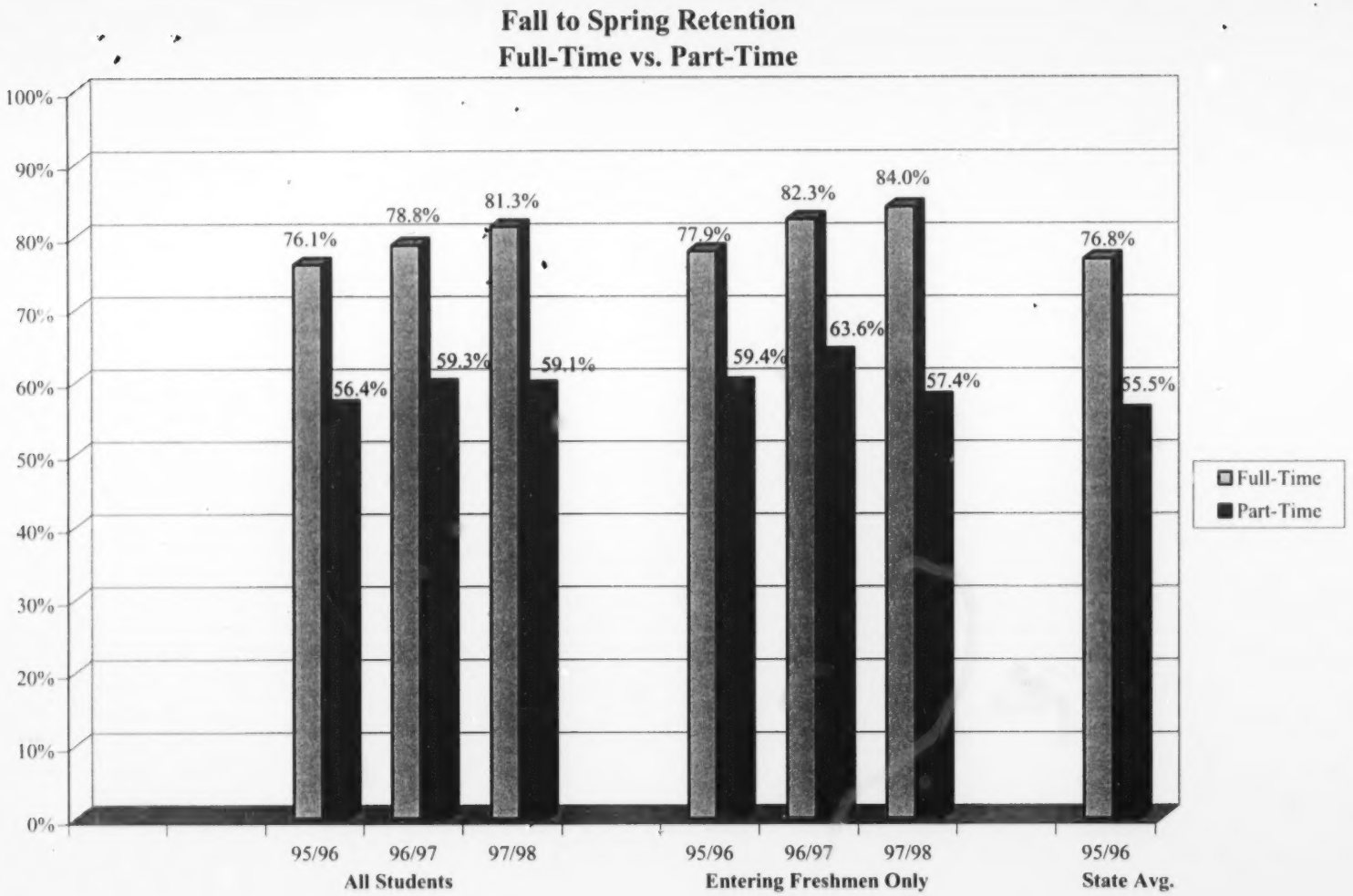
Spring to Spring	All Students			Entering Freshmen Only			State Average
Measures	**95/96**	**96/97**	**97/98**	**95/96**	**96/97**	**97/98**	
Spring to Spring Total	*N/A*	42.6%	45.2%	*N/A*	38.7%	41.4%	*N/A*
Full-Time	*N/A*	48.9%	51.4%	*N/A*	54.0%	47.9%	*N/A*
Part-Time	*N/A*	39.3%	41.0%	*N/A*	28.3%	35.7%	*N/A*
Academic	*N/A*	*NC*	45.2%	*N/A*	*NC*	40.4%	*N/A*
Technical	*N/A*	45.2%	46.3%	*N/A*	39.3%	42.4%	*N/A*
Undeclared	*N/A*	38.6%	39.2%	*N/A*	33.7%	*NC*	*N/A*
Academic Assoc.	*N/A*	*NC*	45.2%	*N/A*	*NC*	40.4%	*N/A*
Technical Assoc.	*N/A*	48.2%	50.0%	*N/A*	37.3%	37.9%	*N/A*
Associate	*N/A*	48.6%	46.7%	*N/A*	38.3%	39.8%	*N/A*
Certificate	*N/A*	38.8%	40.4%	*N/A*	44.3%	46.9%	*N/A*
Undeclared	*N/A*	38.6%	39.2%	*N/A*	33.7%	*NC*	*N/A*
Finanical Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	41.1%	45.9%	*N/A*
No Fin. Aid	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	*N/A*	34.8%	35.1%	*N/A*

NC indicates that no counts are reported because there were less than fifty students initially in this category. The small size of these categories distorts the percentages and makes comparisons meaningless.

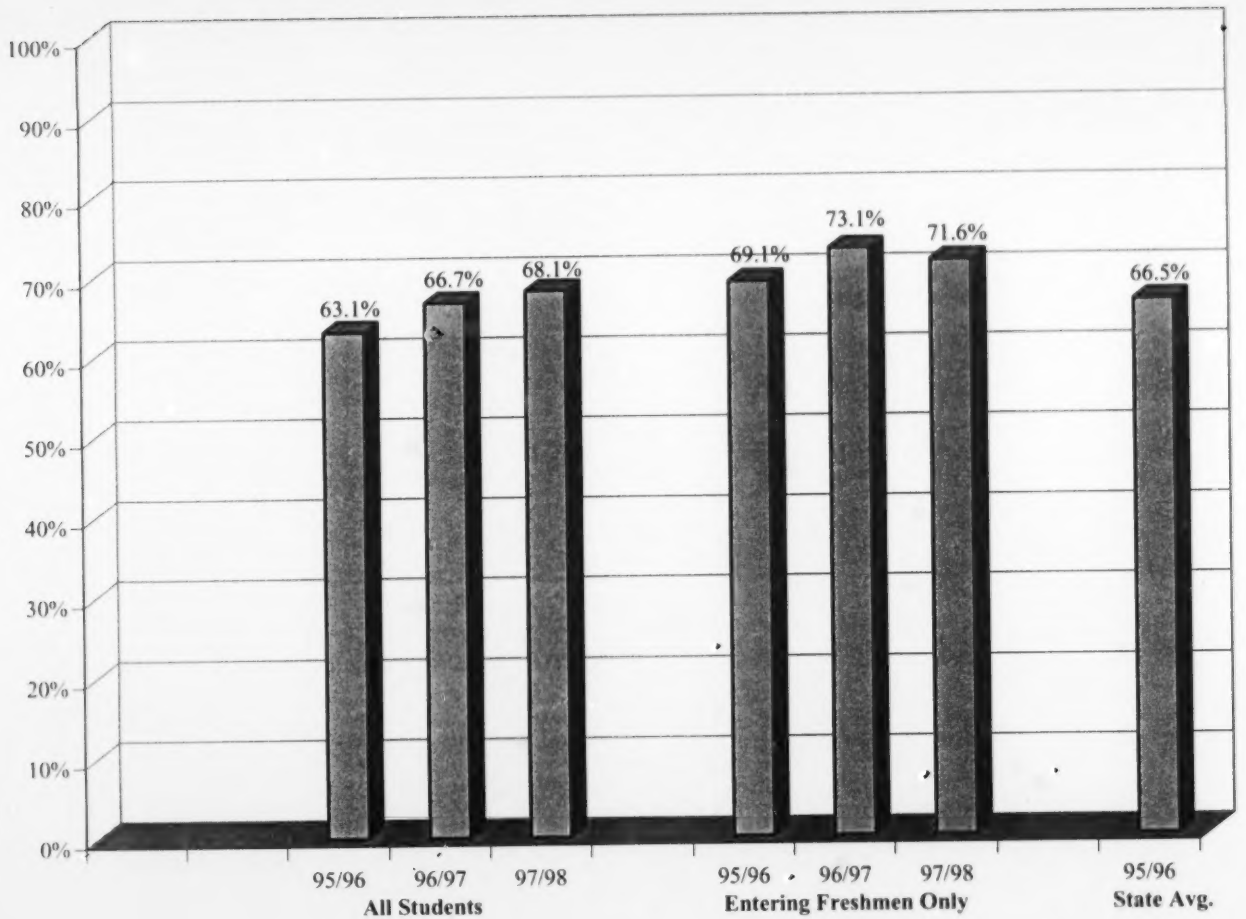
State averages from THECB are only calculated for first-time freshmen from two year colleges.

* State averages for Fall to Spring retention are taken from the *Statewide Annual Data Profile for 1997* from THECB.

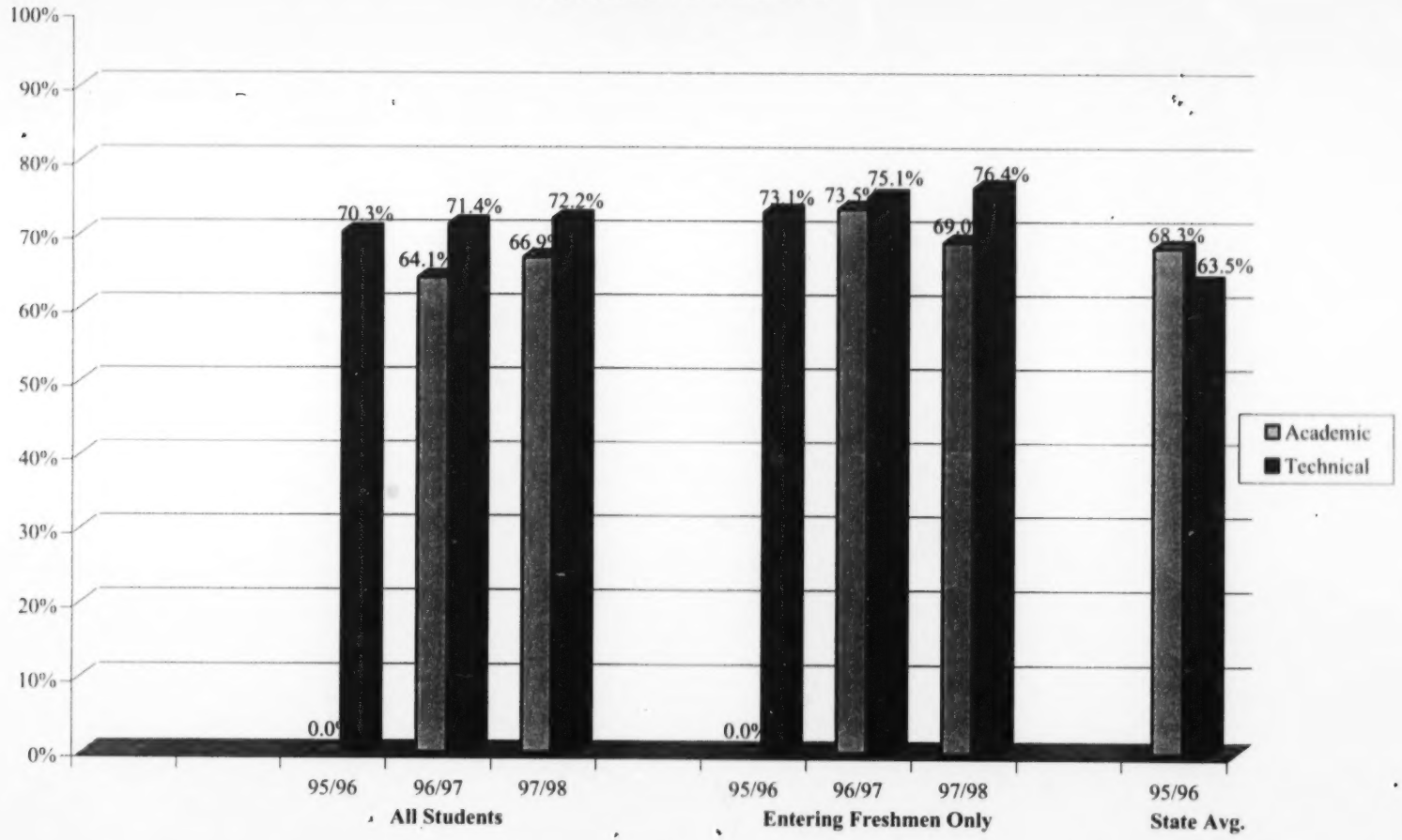
\# State average for Fall to Fall first-time, full-time retention is reported in the *1996 Statistical Report* from THECB.


Fall to Spring Retention
Full-Time vs. Part-Time
100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%
76.1%
56.4%
78.8%
59.3%
81.3%
59.1%
77.9%
59.4%
82.3%
63.6%
84.0%
57.4%
76.8%
55.5%
95/96
96/97
97/98
All Students
95/96
96/97
97/98
Entering Freshmen Only
95/96
State Avg.
Full-Time
Part-Time

Fall to Spring Retention



Fall to Spring Retention
Academic vs. Technical



Fall to Fall Retention
First-Time Full-Time Freshmen